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Race, Gender, and Research: Implications for Teaching from Depictions of Professors in Popular Film, 1985-2005

Mari Dagaz
DePauw University

Brent D. Harger
Gettysburg College

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Abstract
When students enter college classrooms for the first time they inevitably have preconceived images of professors. According to research on student evaluations of teaching, these preconceptions have important implications in college classrooms. This study explores one avenue through which these preconceptions are perpetuated – popular film. Using content analysis we examine popular films released between 1985 and 2005 that contain professors in either primary or secondary roles. Our findings show stereotypical depictions beyond glasses, bow ties, and tweed jackets. Specifically, we find stereotypical images of race and gender as well as an emphasis on the importance of research, sometimes at the expense of teaching or ethical behavior. This research provides instructors with knowledge of the stereotypes that students may have upon entering the college classroom, which may impact classroom interactions and provides insight into how race and gender affect student evaluations of professors.

Keywords
media representations, student evaluations of instructors, race and ethnicity, sociology of gender

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RACE, GENDER, AND RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING FROM DEPICTIONS OF PROFESSORS IN POPULAR FILM, 1985-2005*

Both authors contributed equally to the completion of this paper.

Mari Dagaz
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
DePauw University
P.O. Box 37
Greencastle, IN 46135
maridagaz@depauw.edu

Brent Harger
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Albright College
P.O. Box 15234
Reading, PA 19612
bharger@alb.edu

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ABSTRACT

When students enter college classrooms for the first time they inevitably have preconceived images of professors. According to research on student evaluations of teaching, these preconceptions have important implications in college classrooms. This study explores one avenue through which these preconceptions are perpetuated – popular film. Using content analysis we examine popular films released between 1985 and 2005 that contain professors in either primary or secondary roles. Our findings show stereotypical depictions beyond glasses, bow ties, and tweed jackets. Specifically, we find stereotypical images of race and gender as well as an emphasis on the importance of research, sometimes at the expense of teaching or ethical behavior. This research provides instructors with knowledge of the stereotypes that students may have upon entering the college classroom, which may impact classroom interactions and provides insight into how race and gender affect student evaluations of professors.

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The transition to college is an important, and potentially daunting, one in the lives of young people. When faced with this transition, Merton's (1968) concept of anticipatory socialization suggests that incoming students will seek information about their upcoming college experiences in order to arrive at a definition of what college life will be like (Wheeler 1966). Thus, an incoming first year student will likely seek information regarding living away from home, interacting with college-age peers, the workload of a typical college class, and what to expect from faculty members. As a result of this information seeking, when students enter college classrooms for the first time they inevitably have preconceived images of professors from a wide range of sources, including guidance counselors, parents, college or university representatives, peers, and the media. Instructors, then, face the dual challenge of introducing first year students to college life while dealing with student preconceptions regarding the classroom experience, requirements, and workload.

While it is important to recognize all of the possible preconceptions that students bring to campus, in this project we are primarily concerned with the potential impact of popular film on the expectations of incoming college freshmen. While professors are depicted in a number of media, few television shows include professors as major characters and fewer still regularly depict these characters on campus or in the classroom. Because of this, we chose to focus our analysis on depictions of professors in popular film. Thus, we recognize that students have different sources of information about the transition to college but argue that the media, which has long been seen as an important mechanism of socialization (Croteau and Hoynes 2002), and popular film in particular, is likely to have at least a small influence on the expectations of many

students and a large influence on the expectations of a few. These expectations, in turn, provide students with a mechanism through which to judge their college experiences. As a result, the images of college life that students receive from popular films may affect their approach to learning and their evaluations of instructors at the end of the semester. In this paper we examine depictions of college professors in popular films in order to understand the types of cultural images that exist of professors and how these images might affect student expectations as they make this transition.

Our focus in the current study is on the *potential images of professors* to which incoming students might be exposed in popular film. While the extent to which these images impact the expectations of incoming students is beyond the scope of the current study, we believe that an analysis of the images of professors that exist in these films can provide instructors with knowledge of the potential preconceptions that they need to contend with in order to meet or redefine student expectations. Thus, two important questions need to be addressed: 1) how are professors portrayed in popular film? and 2) how might these portrayals influence student perceptions and expectations?

To explore the answers to these questions, we conduct a content analysis of popular films (N=48) released between 1985 and 2005 featuring at least one professor. When selecting our sample we aimed to include a wide range of films while limiting our analysis to those movies that students are most likely to be aware of in terms of original release date, home video availability, and box office gross. In our analysis, we examine whether professors in film conform to common stereotypes[1] as well as how professors

[1] Though we were unable to find a direct source of contemporary stereotypical images of professors, conversations with undergraduate and graduate students helped us to

interact with their students. We analyze these depictions across age, gender, and racial lines in order to see where differences arise and determine the extent to which professors in film accurately reflect the demographics of professors in the United States. Through this analysis, we are able to see the images to which students may be exposed and consider how these portrayals may affect student expectations. We then compare the images in these films with data on Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) to consider how these depictions may affect classroom expectations and experiences.

MASS MEDIA AS SOCIALIZING AGENT

Mass media have long been thought of as an important mechanism of socialization. Since the earliest days of television, researchers recognized the potential social implications of this form of mass media (Head 1954). Studies over the past 50 years have often examined portrayals of deviance, particularly violent acts, on television to investigate the impact of violent images on aggressive urges in children (Anderson 2000). The representation of women and racial and ethnic minorities became important concerns in the 1960s and ‘70s, as these groups became more vocal in protesting the distorted images produced in visual media. Subsequent research documented gender

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develop a list of preconceptions in this area including glasses, briefcases, and conservative clothing. One particular stereotype highlighted was that of a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. This stereotype can be found in popular media such as in the television show “The Simpsons” (Baeza et al. 1994) when the lead character, Homer, who had taken a job as an adult education night school teacher created a leather jacket with tweed elbow patches and was corrected by his wife. She informed Homer that it is “supposed to be leather patches on a tweed jacket.”

and racial stereotypes prevalent in mass media representations finding that women are more often portrayed in comedic roles, family roles, and less prestigious occupations than are men. Davis (1990) found that the representation of minority groups improved over time, but found no real status change for women who still inhabited objectified, domestic, or subservient roles in media portrayals. When women are shown in non-stereotypical roles such as lawyer, doctor, detective, or police officer, they are often portrayed as less adequate at fulfilling the functions of these roles and their lives are still consumed with their own physical appearance and needing a man to be fulfilled (Heywood 1998). As a result, these images play a role in reinforcing dominant gender and racial stereotypes.

Portrayals of age in prime-time television present a similarly unbalanced image. Research by Lauzen and Dozier (2005a) found that individuals over 60 made up only 4 percent of major characters in prime-time television shows during the 2002-2003 season. While they found that overall leadership and occupational power increased with age up to age 60, middle-aged males were more likely to play leadership roles than their female counterparts. Middle-aged males were also more likely to hold occupational power on these programs.

Similar reinforcements of stereotypes regarding gender, race, and age are found in popular film. For example, Eschholz, Bufkin, and Long (2002) conduct a content analysis of fifty popular films from 1996 and find that women and minorities are underrepresented and often portrayed in ways that are consistent with traditional stereotypes. Similarly, in an analysis of the top 100 domestic grossing films of 2002, Lauzen and Dozier (2005b) found that major male characters strongly outnumbered

major female characters and that, on average, female characters were younger than their male counterparts, with the majority in their 20s and 30s compared to the majority of male characters in their 30s and 40s. Like their analysis of television characters, leadership and occupational power increased with age, but only for men. As female characters aged, Lauzen and Dozier (2005b: 444) found that they were less likely to have goals. They note that these portrayals "imply that men have tasks to accomplish in the world, regardless of age" while "as women age, their lives become less purposeful."

Just as these media depictions of gender, race, and age have important implications for the stereotypes that persist in the United States, depictions of professors in popular culture have important implications for the expectations of students going to college for the first time. This transition is characteristic of what Merton (1968:438) termed *anticipatory socialization*, or "the acquisition of values and orientations found in statuses and groups in which one is not yet engaged but which one is likely to enter." In her work on the transition from elementary school to junior high school in Norway, Waerdahl (2005:204) argues that three elements of anticipatory socialization are important: "personal ability and capacities;" "alienation from [one's] present reference group;" and "knowledge of norms and values of the group one aspires to become a member of." In the current study we are concerned with the third element and ask how information from popular films may affect incoming students' "knowledge of norms and values" associated with college life.

High school students preparing to enter college have a wide variety of sources for knowledge of the values and norms associated with college life. While a part of this process is formalized through things such as admissions packets and orientation

sessions, Merton (1968:439) notes that much of it is "*implicit*, *unwitting*, and *informal*" (emphasis in original). For some students, this implicit, unwitting, and informal knowledge of college life may be passed down by older relatives or friends who have gone to college and can report on their experiences, while others may not have access to these types of firsthand accounts (Wheeler 1966:85). In the absence of this type of information, Waerdahl (2005:204) notes that "generic symbols are used and stereotypical representations . . . from media, etc. are more easily adopted."

While the influence of media representations may be particularly strong among students with no access to firsthand information about college life, numerous studies on student evaluations of teaching suggest that stereotypical expectations affect student attitudes in general. Anderson and Miller (1997:218), for example, find that "students appear to evaluate 'likeability' and 'competence' for men and women on different bases." Further, these studies indicate that men and women who do not meet stereotypical gender expectations in the classroom tend to be evaluated lower than those who do (Anderson and Miller 1997; Basow 2000; Kierstead, D'Agostino, and Dill 1988).

In light of increasing calls for accountability on the part of professors as university budgets are cut (Hickock 2006; Sykes 1989), it is important to understand from where the student expectations that are affecting their evaluations of teaching come. As noted above, media depictions are one possible source. In order to take a first step toward a better understanding of the stereotypes that exist in the media about professors and the potential influence of these stereotypes on students, we analyze the portrayals of professors in a particular medium – popular film. This analysis includes an examination

of the style of dress, classroom performance, and interactions with students that may influence the expectations of incoming students.

METHODS

While professors are depicted in a number of media, not all media lend themselves to a systematic study of these depictions. Few television shows, for example, include professors as major characters and fewer still regularly depict these characters on campus or in the classroom. As a result, it would be difficult to identify episodes in which professors appear. Further, not all of these episodes are readily available for purchase or rental. In contrast, it is relatively easy to identify and access relevant popular films in order to analyze the depictions of professors. Finally, financial figures indicate that a large number of people are watching movies, both in theatres and at home. In 2009 alone, $28.38 billion was spent on movies in the U.S. (McBride 2010).

In selecting our sample, we sought to view a wide range of films while limiting our analysis to those movies that students are most likely to access. With this in mind, our sample consists of English language films released in the United States between 1985 and 2005. Upon choosing this timeframe, we searched three online movie databases (www.imdb.com, www.rottentomatoes.com, and www.allmovie.com) for the keyword "professor," assembling a rough list of 152 films. We then narrowed this list by eliminating movies for which we could not find information on domestic box office gross (we searched both www.boxofficemojo.com and www.the-numbers.com for official U.S. box office gross), resulting in 89 films with grosses ranging from $4,626 to $373,524,485. Because we are interested in depictions of professors in films that college students are likely to be aware of or have seen, we limited our analysis to

movies that have grossed over $10 million at the domestic box office, trimming our list to 48[2] films. We used $10 million as a rough way to distinguish between films that were released by larger studios and, correspondingly, students are more likely to be aware of due to larger advertising budgets and wider releases. Box office grosses were compared both unadjusted and in constant 2005 dollars and did not change the number of films grossing over $10 million.

Having assembled a list of films, we constructed a pilot coding sheet focusing on variables such as type of college or university, department, demographic characteristics, clothing, student interaction, and items stereotypically associated with professors such as glasses, briefcases, pocket protectors, and bow ties. This code sheet was refined through a series of "test" films that both authors watched to determine inter-coder reliability. After four films, an inter-coder reliability above 80 percent was achieved with the final code sheet. At this point, each author was assigned half of the films for quantitative coding and qualitative analysis of professors' actions with a specific focus on scenes involving students. In focusing on these scenes, we sought to capture the interactions between students and professors that college students are exposed to in popular film and examine how these interactions might affect student expectations or cultural stereotypes. We viewed each film in its entirety and took detailed qualitative notes in addition to completing a quantitative coding sheet for each professor that was

[2] Our original list consisted of 51 films. We were unable to obtain a copy of one film (*Shadowlands* [Attenborough 1993]) and there were two films on our original list that, upon viewing, did not include professors, resulting in our final sample of 48 films. A complete list of included films is available in the Appendix.

depicted with a speaking role. For scenes with crowds of characters who were implied to be professors, we took notes but did not include these characters in our quantitative analysis.Because the films were available on home video, we were able to pause, rewind, and fast-forward the films and used these methods to stop and review playback to code for details such as professors' clothing or classroom arrangements and to write qualitative notes without missing potentially important information from the films.

Variables

Variables on the final coding sheet focused on a variety of character and place characteristics. In addition to film information such as box office gross, year of release, and genre, character names were noted wherever possible. Characteristics of the setting were recorded using variables related to the time period in which the film takes place, whether the character was seen in a college or university setting, whether the character had a principal role in the story, and, when possible, the type and name of the professor's institution and academic department. Other variable categories focused on demographic characteristics, hair, clothing, mode of transportation, accessories (such as whether the professor wears glasses or carries a briefcase), and student interaction. In all, we coded for 38 variables across 125 professors in 48 films. The distribution of films and professors by year, genre, and box office gross can be seen in Table 1. After completing our analyses, we compared our findings to data from the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in order to determine whether the depictions we observed reflected the reality of race, gender, and age on college campuses.

(INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

RESULTS

Comparing our findings to the NSOPF reveals that there are a number of similarities between movie professors and their real-life counterparts but that there are also important differences that may affect student expectations and stereotypes. For example, professors as depicted in films are much more likely to be male and less likely to be over 60 years old than those in the NSOPF (see Table 2). While the percentage of white professors in films (88 percent) was relatively close to the percentage of white professors in the NSOPF (82.4 percent), African American professors in films are actually overrepresented (9.6 percent compared to 5.5 percent), although they are overwhelmingly male. Additionally, Asian and Pacific Islanders are severely underrepresented and there was only one Hispanic professor in the films that were included in this study.

(INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)

Despite the relative lack of Hispanic and Asian characters, it should be noted that there are a broad range of depictions for both white and African American professors. For example, white and African American professors are shown in both comedic and serious roles in a wide range of disciplines. Despite this range, however, there are some notable omissions. There are, for example, no African American business, law, or mathematics professors, although around 6 percent of professors in these fields are African American according to the NSOPF. The only female African American character in these films is a scientist in *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* (Segal and Grazer 2000), who is depicted as beautiful and intelligent but viewed primarily as a love interest for the male lead and only briefly shown in a professorial capacity.

Depictions of academic departments in these films focus on disciplines that may be conceived of as traditionally male dominated such as business, law, math, natural sciences, and medicine. According to the NSOPF (National Center for Education Statistics 2004), academia is dominated by males in all areas other than education. Interestingly, not one professor in the films we analyzed is depicted as being in a school of education. While there are no depictions of disciplines that may be thought of as female-dominated, there are disciplines that would tend to lend themselves to being more heavily populated by females, such as the social sciences and the humanities (see Table 2). Of the male professors depicted in the films, 46.5 percent are situated in business, law, math, medicine, and natural sciences. However, only five of 24 (20.8 percent) of female professor roles are situated in these disciplines (one in law, one in medicine, and three in the natural sciences).

Images of Race

Beyond these demographic differences, there are a number of qualitative differences related to depictions of race and gender in these films. Due to the range of depictions noted above and the relatively small number nonwhite characters, it is impossible to say that either white or African American characters are always portrayed in a particular way. For example, the African American Sherman Klump is portrayed in *The Nutty Professor* (Shadyac and Grazer 1996) as an eccentric goofball, but this depiction is similar to the white Philip Brainard character in *Flubber* (Mayfield and Hughes 1997). There are, however, some cases where characters can be seen as playing to, or against, racial stereotypes, as well as situations in which diversity is marked by additional differences in clothing or behavior.

One case in which racial stereotypes are evident is the movie *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002), which depicts two African American marching band directors at fictional Southern colleges that are known for their marching bands rather than their athletic programs. The movie features a number of marching band competitions between the two schools. Mr. Wade, the band director at Morris Brown College, has won a number of competitions and dresses in flashy suits, such as one that is bright blue and another that is purple with pinstripes. Dr. Lee, the band director of Atlanta A&T is Wade's former assistant and, unlike many of the African Americans in the movie, is depicted as uptight and nerdy. Lee's focus on jazz and music education over providing entertainment is criticized by Atlanta A&T's African American president, who wants the band to be more exciting and more successful in competitions. In comparison to Wade, Lee is depicted throughout the film as not "authentically" black. It is only after he loosens up and allows his students to combine jazz and elements of hip-hop music that Atlanta A&T is able to win a major competition.

In contrast to the depictions of "authentic" African Americans in *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002), Maurice Phipps in *Higher Learning* (Singleton and Hall 1994) is depicted as unemotional and hardnosed. In one scene he intentionally embarrasses students by having them stand when he calls their name and then asks them to leave because they have not paid their tuition. Professor Phipps holds high expectations for his students as if to prove that they are not getting handouts but are worthy of being in the university. It is implied that they have to work harder because they are black, not because they aren't as smart but because they have more to prove. His idea of Black

pride is not related to slang or attitude but to serious and studious behavior in the university.

While some black characters, like Dr. Lee, are able to find a balance between the expectation of acting authentically black and demanding excellence from their students, the idea that African Americans have to overcome the color of their skin is reflected in the physical depictions of black characters. Although there are not enough characters for a detailed statistical analysis, proportionately African Americans are more likely to have facial hair, wear “dressy” clothing, wear glasses, and even wear bow ties than their white counterparts. For example, nine of the 11 African American male characters have facial hair while less than one third (24 of 87) of white male characters were depicted in this way. Similarly, less than half (43 of 109) of white characters wore glasses but two thirds (eight of 12) of African Americans did. This appears to suggest that in order to be taken seriously as a professor, African American characters need to carry some mark of distinction that white characters do not. Thus while white characters occasionally display these marks of distinction, they may be seen more as accessories than as necessary conditions for the representation of white professors. Interestingly, this finding is in line with research by Harlow (2003), who found that African American and female professors reported feeling that they had to do more than white male professors to demonstrate their legitimacy in the classroom.

These markers of distinction extend beyond race to other forms of diversity. Perhaps the best example of this is a scene near the end of *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard and Grazer 2001). In the scene, John Nash is seated at a table as Princeton faculty members approach and give him their pens as a sign of respect. While 14 of the 15

professors in this scene are males, some characters appear to be added to diversify the scene. Among these professors, there is one African American, a young Mediterranean-looking man, and a man in an electric wheelchair. Each of these "diverse" characters has a marker that further sets him apart from the crowd at large. For example, while most of the men in this scene are wearing suits and ties, the Mediterranean man has his shirt partially unbuttoned revealing his chest and the man in the wheelchair is wearing a sweater vest. In this scene it appears as if filmmakers did not think audiences would believe that diverse characters may, in fact, dress in the same way as their "regular" (i.e., able-bodied white male) colleagues.

Viewed from the perspective of future college students, these depictions may contribute to perceptions of African American faculty members as different than the white "norm." In some cases, such as that of Mr. Wade in *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002), students may associate messages about African American "authenticity" with stereotypical associations between African Americans and low intelligence (Devine 1989; Rothbart and John 1993; Wheeler, Jarvis, and Petty 2001). Other depictions, such as the initial academic orientation of Dr. Lee in *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002) and that of Professor Phipps in *Higher Learning* (Singleton and Hall 1994) appear to more closely resemble the steps that real-world African American instructors at majority-white institutions take to counteract these stereotypes in the classroom (discussed below and in Harlow 2003).

Images of Gender

In addition to these differences based on markers of distinction such as race, our analyses also reveal stereotypical gender patterns. While male professors are depicted

in a variety of ways ranging from hegemonic masculinity to bookish nerd, female professors are generally portrayed in fewer ways and the portrayals are most often centered on feminine gender norms. As noted above, only 20.8 percent (five out of 24) of female professor roles are situated in the male-dominated fields of business, law, mathematics, medicine, and natural sciences and one of these women is shown as a sexualized secondary character involved in a relationship with the film's prominent male professor.

While these numbers are roughly in line with real-world proportions, where 29 percent of women are in these fields according to the NSOPF (2004), the women depicted in these films, like African Americans, possess clear markers that are possibly intended to allow the audience to view them as competent professors. The female law professor in *Legally Blonde* (Luketic and Kidney 2001) is not sexualized but rather takes on masculine characteristics as a gruff, demanding, no-nonsense character. While it is clear that the professor is female, she does not display overwhelmingly feminine characteristics. She is a formidable presence in the classroom and is demanding and rather insensitive to her students. She does not hesitate to call on students and embarrass them for not possessing the correct answer. However, another dimension of the character is presented when a female law student considers quitting school after being hit on by her male professor. The female professor has a conversation with the student telling her, "If you are going to let one stupid prick ruin your life, you're not the girl I thought you were." The professor maintains her gruff, no nonsense demeanor, perhaps demonstrating the need for a woman in the field of law to present an image that is more in line with characteristics of masculinity, but this conversation demonstrates

her solidarity with women in what can be perceived as a male domain. Further, this exchange takes place in a beauty parlor, thus bringing in the gender norms of feminine beauty rituals.

The sole female professor of medicine in *Gross Anatomy* (Eberhardt and Hill 1989) likewise does not overtly display feminine qualities and is portrayed not only as a serious professor, but as a gatekeeper for the medical profession allowing only those she deems qualified and worthy to become medical doctors. The introduction of her character takes place in a classroom setting where she presides over a room of fresh, new medical students. She is presented in "appropriate" fashion wearing a short hairstyle and a grey suit. The goal of her performance for the students appears to be to intimidate as she details the requirements of medical school and brings out the body of a deceased woman who will ultimately be dissected by the students. A crack in her character's rough demeanor, however, is displayed toward the end of the film as it becomes clear she is dying of lupus and discusses with a student the need to remember the human side of medicine. Her countenance is thus softened by a show of emotion including tears. This emotional scene does not happen in the university setting, but in the garden of her home. The scene depicts a feminine, nurturing side of the character and while she still maintains some visual cues of being a professor (e.g., books), she shows the stereotypical qualities of a woman – most importantly emotion.

The female professors who are depicted in clearly defined disciplines overwhelmingly occupy positions in the humanities, such as literature, art history and journalism. These characters tend to be sexualized, particularly female professors of literature. It is not uncommon for these women to be shown reading poetry in a sensual

and emotionally dramatic way, in some cases arousing the sexual interest of a male student or classroom observer. The most obvious and blatant example of this is seen in *Back to School* (Metter and Russell 1986) as the professor, played by Sally Kellerman, sensually reads poetry which causes the student, played by Rodney Dangerfield, to orgasmically exclaim “yes, yes, yes” to the professor’s delight. While this is an extreme and intentionally humorous example, similar depictions of female professors are seen in other films, such as *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (Streisand and Milchan 1996). The quality most often shown is that of emotion-based, nurturing, and caring women – traditionally feminine stereotypes.

While many female characters conform to these stereotypes, male professors in these films are depicted in a wider variety of ways. Nevertheless, stereotypes do exist for male professors–notably of the researcher who is disinterested in teaching or not adequately capable of fulfilling the nurturing role associated with teaching. The majority of male professors portrayed in film focus on research and may or may not be shown in front of a classroom. The focus of their work lies in practical applications of the knowledge they generate. Coupled with this focus on research is the mentality that research ethics stand in the way of productivity. Physicality is also an important element for male professors, who are generally portrayed as physically masculine in some form; being shown as physically strong and capable, as in *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg and Kennedy 1993), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Spielberg and Watts 1989), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich 2004), and *The Time Machine* (Wells and Parkes 2002), or sexually capable such as in *Moonstruck* (Jewison 1987), *Legally Blonde*

(Luketic and Kidney 2001), *Loser* (Heckerling and Caplan 2000), and *The Life of David Gale* (Parker and Cage 2003).

While we expected to find many images of the stereotypical lecherous, sexual predator male professor, this portrayal was less common than we anticipated.[3] Twelve of the 49 films showed a depiction of sexual relationships between male professors and students. In one case, *Scary Movie 2* (Wayans and Gold 2001), the professor embodied all of the stereotypical behaviors of that expectation. However, this movie was meant to bring stereotypes and genre conventions to the forefront in a humorous display. Another film, *Loser* (Herckerling and Caplan 2000), (a comedy in which the image of the male professor was not a comedic role) clearly provides this stereotype in a character of a male professor who is having an affair with an undergraduate student. He comments to the student that he is risking his job to be with her – that the board frowns upon this because it is considered "taking advantage of the power we have over impressionable minds." This professor is not interested in a long-term relationship with the young student and is later blackmailed by other students who find out about the relationship.

Images of professors in the films analyzed fall along traditional stereotypical gender norms of masculinity and femininity, which may influence student expectations. Female professors in these films are predominately portrayed as sensitive and nurturing unless in male-dominated professions when they take on more caustic personality traits such as the law professor in *Legally Blonde* (Luketic and Kidney 2001) and the

[3] Reports in newspapers and magazines created a sense of rampant sexual relations between professors and students which subsequently led to broad university restrictions of these relationships (e.g. Gibbs, Epperson, and Rochman 1995).

professor of medicine in *Gross Anatomy* (Eberhardt and Hill 1989). Likewise, male professors are more clearly linked with masculine views of dominance and intelligence and demonstrate more limited teaching skills. A student who has viewed these films may, as a result, expect professors to behave in stereotypically gendered ways. This expectation is supported by research that finds faculty teaching is evaluated more highly when they conform to stereotypically gendered behavior patterns (Anderson and Miller 1997; Basow 2000; Kierstead et al 1988).

Images of Research

While the image of lecherous professor was sometimes shown in film portrayals, the majority of unethical actions by male professors involved putting themselves or others in dangerous research situations. For example, David Morrow in *The Haunting* (de Bont and Arnold 1999) enlists individuals who are susceptible to fear in a psychology experiment that leads to two deaths. Morrow does not appear to gain the approval of an Institutional Review Board for his research and continues his study despite his department chair's position that his work cannot be conducted ethically. Similar ethical lapses are seen in other films, such as when Sherman Klump and Otto Octavius experiment on themselves in *The Nutty Professor* (Shadyac and Grazer 1996) and *Spider-Man 2* (Raimi and Arad 2004), respectively, and when Jordan Perry creates monsters through scientific experiments in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze* (Pressman and Chan 1991).

Beyond these unethical approaches to research, many male professors in film express discontent or dissatisfaction with teaching, which they view as a waste of time or a necessary evil that goes along with research. As such, teaching is seen as an

intrusion into what they perceive as their “real” or more valuable work. The character of John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard and Grazer 2001), for example, abhorred teaching until he grew much older and retired. In addition to teaching as an intrusion, other male professors neglect their classrooms because of their perceived incompetence. One character, for example, expressed dissatisfaction with teaching because of his perceived failure at being “reasonably adequate” while Gregory Larkin, a math professor in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (Streisand and Milchan 1996), enlists a female literature professor, Rose Morgan, to help him learn the art of teaching. Rose is nurturing, caring, and expressive in the classroom, and her lessons include connecting his lectures to their experiences and facing students instead of facing the chalk board while writing mathematical formulas. Other male professors are shown using their classroom teaching as a way of pushing their own agenda, such as Professor Farady in *Arlington Road* (Pellington and Gorai 1999) who teaches a course on terrorism. In a class discussion of government mistakes he becomes angry and emotional to the point that students think he is somewhat off balance.

Despite the emphasis that many male professors in these films place on research and their failures in the classroom, there are some who take the opposite approach. For example, Paul Armstrong, a law professor in *Just Cause* (Glimcher 1995), expresses disgust at the idea that teaching is devalued and is not considered real work. When his wife tells him that taking on a case would get him in the real world, he asks, “Why is every fucking thing except teaching the real world?” Similarly, when English professor Graham Corey in *D.O.A.* (Jankel, Morton, and Sander 1988) learns that he has been passed over for promotion to full professor because he has not

published enough, he states, “Look, some of us just want to be teachers… We don’t have any literary pretentions. We’re just fucking good teachers!” These statements acknowledge the differentiation of professor roles and the status hierarchy that the different roles and obligations of professors occupy. It is not unusual for teaching to be devalued, nor is it unusual for the professorate to be accused of devaluing their role of teacher and doing a poor job.

These gendered depictions of teaching and research in popular film, in which men are primarily researchers and women are primarily teachers, may have implications for the attitudes that students bring with them to college. Both male and female incoming students may expect their male instructors to be less interested in classroom interactions while expecting their female instructors to foster deeper emotional connections. Paradoxically, these expectations may have greater negative ramifications for women because students may see research in male-dominated fields such as the natural sciences as more important than teaching because of the numerous depictions of this type of research in films. In contrast, the type of research that faculty members conduct in female-dominated fields such as the humanities is rarely depicted in film. Students may accept that a biologist has limited time to meet with students, for example, if they are familiar with the idea that biologists work on cures for cancer. Similarly, students may discount the claims of a historian that she has limited time for students because they have less of a conception of what historical research involves.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING

Our findings concerning depictions of race, gender, and attitudes toward research in popular films have a number of potential implications for the expectations of

incoming college students. Because these images may impact student expectations for classroom interactions, it is possible that professors who do not meet expectations based on race and gender could receive negative feedback through student evaluations. This is in line with numerous studies that have examined student evaluations of teaching (SETs). Comparing our findings to research on race, gender, and SETs reveals interesting similarities and implications for faculty members.

While a number of studies reveal a stereotypical association between African Americans and low intelligence (Devine 1989; Rothbart and John 1993; Wheeler, et al. 2001), researchers have found that overall student evaluations of white and African American faculty are similar (Ho, Thomsen, and Sidanius 2009; Sidanius 1989). Despite this overall similarity, Ho et al. (2009) find that the processes by which students evaluate faculty differs by race, with both white and African American students placing more weight on the academic competence of black instructors than of white instructors. Further, Harlow's (2003:354) research demonstrates that African American instructors are aware that they are stereotyped as having low intelligence and take steps in the classroom to counteract this impression, such as "projecting a strict, authoritative demeanor, making students aware of their professional achievements, and (for black women) reminding students to call them Doctor or Professor rather than by their first name, Ms., or Mrs."

These efforts by African American instructors to convey their authority in the classroom parallel the marks of distinction that we observed in depictions of African Americans in popular film. In both cases, African Americans must do something extra to counteract what Harlow (2003:348) calls their "devalued racial status." Like Wade and

Lee in *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002), the issue of authenticity is also present in Harlow's (2003) study, with African American instructors reporting that their race added to their ability to understand racial issues but prevented students from recognizing their objective knowledge of the material. It is important to note, though, that many of the studies on SETs have taken place at majority-white institutions that may not reflect the attitudes of students regarding what it means to be an "authentically" African American instructor at schools like those depicted in *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002).

Combined, the depictions of race in popular film and the data on SETs reinforce the idea that African Americans need to go beyond the expectations for whites in order to be seen as equals. Awareness of this, reinforced by depictions in popular film, may contribute to lower levels of classroom performance by African American instructors due to stereotype threat (Steel and Aronson 1995). Indeed, Harlow (2003:355) finds that "this pressure to be a racial role model often manifested itself in overpreparation and a hyperawareness of speech patterns or mistakes of any kind." In contrast to the expectations of students in *Drumline* (Stone III and Bourne 2002), both white and African American students at majority-white institutions appear to reward behavior like that of Professor Phipps in *Higher Learning* (Singleton and Hall 1994) who implies that African Americans must do more to prove that they belong.

There are also a number of studies of student perceptions of teachers and teaching effectiveness related to issues of gender. A review of this literature shows that gender role norms are an important concept in how students perceive and evaluate their professors (Anderson and Miller 1997; Basow 2000; Kierstead, et al. 1988; Miller and Chamberlin 2000; Rubin 1981). Findings indicate that women who do not follow

gendered stereotypical expectations tend to be evaluated lower than those who do. Likewise, men who do not meet masculine gendered stereotypical expectations tend to be evaluated lower, whereas both male and female professors who blend gendered stereotypical norms tend to be evaluated higher (Anderson and Miller 1997; Basow 2000; Kierstead et al. 1988).

So we are faced with the reality that professors who adhere to appropriate gender role norms are more rewarded by students. In line with traditional gender-role stereotypes, women are rewarded for being nurturing, friendly and supportive and punished for being authoritarian and objective. Considering the concept of likeability of the professor and its impact on student evaluations of teaching, Delucchi (2000) finds that the better rapport with students, the more the professor creates a feeling of community in the classroom, and the ease with which students can talk to the professor – that is the higher likeability of the professor – the less students report learning in the classroom. Ironically, the less friendly a female professor is, the lower the evaluations received from her students (Anderson and Miller 1997; Kierstead et al. 1988), yet the more likeable a professor is the lower the level of learning reported by students. Thus, female professors face a catch-22 in terms of student expectations in which they must strike a balance between appearing feminine but not so feminine that they lose their legitimacy in the classroom.

The difficulty of maintaining legitimacy is reflected in an examination of student perceptions of status in which Miller and Chamberlin (2000) find that men are more often identified as professors and women more often identified as teachers even when the opposite is in fact true. Role identification tends to be attributed upward for males

and downward for females which may be related to gender-related teaching styles and gender-role stereotypes. While SETs are often believed to be gender neutral, Anderson and Miller (1997:218) find that “students appear to evaluate ‘likeability’ and ‘competence’ for men and women on different bases.” However, standard SETs do not capture the student centered approach that female professors tend to prefer and thus female professors do not accrue the same positive evaluations as men. Male and female teachers are rewarded and punished for different behaviors and expectations that are related to gender-role expectations in larger society (Anderson and Miller 1997).

In addition to differences researchers have found, these evaluations may be more important now than ever before due to increasing calls for accountability on the part of professors as university budgets are cut (Hickock 2006; Sykes 1989). As professors attempt to navigate these expectations and strike a balance between effective teaching strategies and conforming to the roles students are most likely to reward, an analysis such as this is helpful in understanding where these expectations may come from and how they may be overcome. This is exemplified in Harlow’s (2003:353) study where African American professors reported a number of strategies for overcoming perceived stereotypes, such as stating their credentials on the first day of class.

CONCLUSION

Anticipatory socialization suggests that when students enter college classrooms for the first time they inevitably have preconceived images of professors (Merton 1968; Wheeler 1966). While these images likely come from a variety of sources, the similarity

between our findings and those from researchers studying student evaluations of teaching, combined with the fact that not all students have access to firsthand accounts of college life suggests that at least some of these images come from media examples. In this paper we have demonstrated a number of the cultural images that exist of professors in popular film and found that portrayals of professors are generally in line with racial and gendered stereotypes in broader society.

Despite the fact that African Americans are overrepresented, there is very little diversity in popular films beyond the Black/White dichotomy. African American professors in film deal with issues of what it means to be “authentically” black and, like in Harlow’s (2003) work, appear to need markers of status, such as facial hair, glasses, or blow ties, beyond those of white professors in order to be seen as legitimate. Despite the wide range of depictions of male characters both White and Black, female characters are generally portrayed in ways that center on feminine gender norms of caring and teaching “soft” subjects in the social sciences, arts, and humanities. Women who are seen outside of these areas, like African American professors, appear to need a marker of status. While markers of status for African Americans increase perceived legitimacy, however, markers of status for women seem to demonstrate that despite their “masculine” self-presentation, these women are caring and emotional.

Our final finding concerns the ever-present tension between research and teaching. The majority of male professors in the films we watched focus on their research, while most female professors are shown primarily as teachers in the classroom. While there are rare examples of men who place teaching above research, most put research first, even to the extent of violating ethical practices to do so. These

images are in strong contrast to female professors who are shown as natural teachers, embodying the qualities of caring, nurturing, and expressiveness.

The goal of this paper has been to examine the images of professors present in popular films, but this examination suggests the need for future research that explores the extent to which these images play a role in the expectations of incoming college freshmen. Further, future research should explore whether students who have been exposed to these images negatively evaluate instructors who do not conform to them, as the research on SETs suggests. Finally, the fact that our findings, combined with those of researchers studying student evaluations of teaching, reveal stereotypically gendered patterns raises the question of whether students are developing expectations of female professors based on films or whether students *and* filmmakers are drawing on broader societal expectations in their respective expectations and depictions of women. Research analyzing the level of influence these images have on students can be seen as the first step in answering this question.

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APPENDIX

List of Films by U.S. Box Office Gross

Film #	Title	Year	U.S. Box Office
1	Spider-Man 2	2004	$373,524,485
2	Jurassic Park	1993	$357,067,947
3	The Lost World: Jurassic Park	1997	$229,086,679
4	Indiana Jones and the Last	1989	$197,171,806

	Crusade		
5	The Day After Tomorrow	2004	$186,740,799
6	A Beautiful Mind	2001	$170,742,341
7	Good Will Hunting	1997	$138,433,435
8	The Nutty Professor	1996	$128,814,019
9	Nutty Professor II: The Klumps	2000	$123,307,945
10	The Pelican Brief	1993	$100,768,056
11	Legally Blonde	2001	$95,001,351
12	Flubber	1997	$92,977,226
13	Back to School	1986	$91,258,000
14	The Haunting	1999	$91,188,905
15	Moonstruck	1987	$80,640,528
16	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II	1991	$78,656,813
17	Scary Movie 2	2001	$71,277,420
18	Mona Lisa Smile	2003	$63,803,100
19	Hellboy	2004	$59,103,901
20	Throw Mamma from the Train	1987	$57,915,972
21	The Time Machine	2002	$56,684,819
22	Drumline	2002	$56,398,162
23	Bull Durham	1988	$50,888,729
24	Malice	1993	$46,405,336
25	Fisher King	1991	$41,895,491
26	The Mirror has Two Faces	1996	$41,267,469

27	Evolution	2001	$38,311,134
28	Higher Learning	1994	$38,290,723
29	Just Cause	1995	$36,853,222
30	Dreamcatcher	2003	$33,685,268
31	Lake Placid	1999	$31,770,414
32	The Prince & Me	2004	$28,165,882
33	Necessary Roughness	1999	$26,255,594
34	Fallen	1998	$25,232,289
35	Arlington Road	1999	$24,756,177
36	One True Thing	1998	$23,209,440
37	The Life of David Gale	2003	$19,694,635
38	Wonder Boys	2000	$19,389,454
39	Man of the House	2005	$19,118,247
40	21 Grams	2003	$16,248,701
41	Loser	2000	$15,464,026
42	Sweet Liberty	1986	$14,205,021
43	Prince of Darkness	1987	$14,182,492
44	Real Genius	1985	$12,952,019
45	DOA	1988	$12,706,478
46	Jason X	2001	$12,610,731
47	Gross Anatomy	1989	$11,604,598
48	Kinsey	2004	$10,214,647

While we did our best to compose a list of popular films featuring professors based on various internet searches, we realize that the above list is not exhaustive. There is a high likelihood that we have left something out. Despite this fact, we feel that the movies in our sample are representative of the popular films featuring professors that students are likely to have been exposed to in the past twenty years.

Table 1: Sample characteristics by number of films and number of professors.

	Films (N=48)		Professors (N=125)	
	N	%	N	%
Year				
1985-1990	10	20.8	33	26.4
1991-1995	8	16.7	14	11.2
1996-2000	13	27.1	35	28.0

2001-2005	17	35.4	43	34.4
Genre				
Action	3	6.3	5	4.0
Adventure	3	6.3	8	6.4
Comedy	18	37.5	45	36.0
Drama	12	25.0	47	37.6
Horror	5	10.4	7	5.6
Romance	1	2.1	4	3.2
Science	1	2.1	2	1.6
Fiction				
Other	5	10.4	7	5.6
Box Office Gross (in millions of dollars)				
10-24.9	14	29.2	39	31.2
25-49.9	11	22.9	20	16.0
50-74.9	7	14.6	20	16.0
75-99.9	6	12.5	16	12.8
100+	10	20.8	30	24.0

Table 2: Demographic characteristics by film, population, and character.

	By Film (N=48)		Est. Population[1] (thousands)		By Character[2] (N=125)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	46	95.8	696	57.4	101	80.8***
Female	18	37.5	516	42.6	24	19.2***
Race						
White	46	95.8	999	82.4	110	88.0
Black	8	16.7	67	5.5	12	9.6
Asian	2	4.1	76	6.3	2	1.6*
Hispanic	1	2.1	42	3.5	1	0.8
Other	0	0.0	28	2.3	0	0.0
Age						
Young	15	31.3	257	21.2	19	15.2
Middle Age	43	89.6	721	59.5	88	71.2*
Old	8	16.7	234	19.3	10	8.0**
Started Young and Aged	2	4.2	-	-	7	5.6

During Film

Discipline						
Social Sciences	6	12.5	96	7.9	7	5.6
Business/Law	4	8.3	155	12.8	5	4.0**
Math	7	14.6	161	13.3	13	10.4
Arts/Humanities	19	39.6	261	21.5	31	24.8
Natural Sciences	16	33.3	127	10.5	23	18.4**
Medicine	1	2.1	62	5.1	11	8.8
Education	0	0.0	114	9.4	0	0.0**
Administration	9	18.8	-	-	11	8.8
Unknown	18	37.5	-	-	24	19.2

[1] SOURCE: NCES 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty

[2]In comparing the proportions among the characters that we observed with their real-world counterparts we performed independent sample t-tests for difference of proportions

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Mari Dagaz is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at DePauw University. Her teaching and research interests are in social inequalities, childhood, adolescence, family, and

social psychology. Her research focus is on adolescent identity development within schools and families with a focus on the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Brent Harger is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Albright College. His interests include social psychology, childhood, adolescence, education, and media. Combining a number of these interests, his primary research examines the ways that students, their teachers, and principals define and interpret bullying and how this shapes interaction in schools.